

# ***Solfège* as a Reason for the Drop Out of Music School Pupils**

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An evaluation of reading skills in music was undertaken by Zsuzsa Buzás and János Steklács in four music schools in Germany, Hungary and Luxembourg.

1. Luxembourg – Music school of Frisange
2. Luxembourg – Music school of Dudelange
3. Germany – Music school of Wadgassen
4. Hungary – Király-König Péter music school of Szeged

This article will present the results of a statistical survey organised mainly in the music school of Frisange in Luxembourg. We will also provide statistics for the other three music schools. However, due to different administrative structures and curricula, they do not appear in a uniform way. The objective of this study is to show the drop out rates from *solfège* courses over the years defined. Concerning the music school of Frisange, ten interviews were carried out to investigate the reasons for drop outs.

## **1.0 Statistics**

While *solfège* is a mandatory subject in Hungary and Luxembourg, this is not the case in Germany, where the focus is more on the instrumental (or vocal).

### **1.1 Frisange/Luxembourg**

The music school of the community of Frisange was founded in 2003. It is run under the joint responsibility of the Luxembourgish music federation, UGDA,<sup>1</sup> and the community administration. The community of Frisange lies in a rural neighbourhood in the south of the Grand Duchy, directly on the French border and has about 4,300 residents.

### **1.2 Dudelange/Luxembourg**

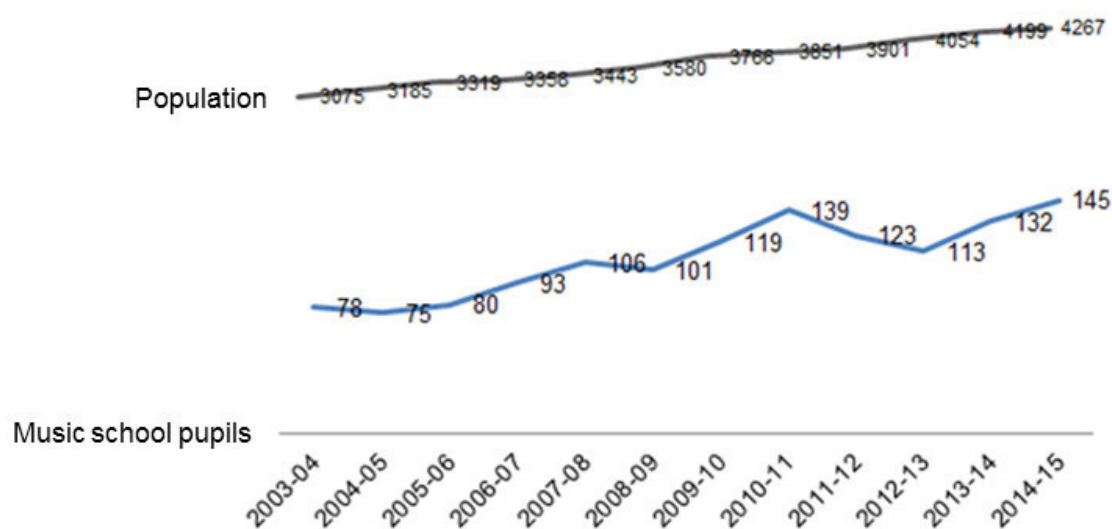
The music school of Dudelange was founded in 1946. It is run under the public ownership of the municipality of Dudelange, a small city of about 20,000 citizens on the south (French) border of Luxembourg (and close to Frisange).<sup>2</sup> With 874 pupils during

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<sup>1</sup> "Union Grand-Duc Adolphe", cf. <[www.ugda.lu](http://www.ugda.lu)>.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Ville de Dudelange, *Ecole régionale de musique*, <<http://www.emdudelange.lu/home/index.php/historique-et-statistiques>>, 07.2015.

the school year 2013/14, it is one of the largest in the country. 472 pupils registered for *solfège* courses.<sup>3</sup>

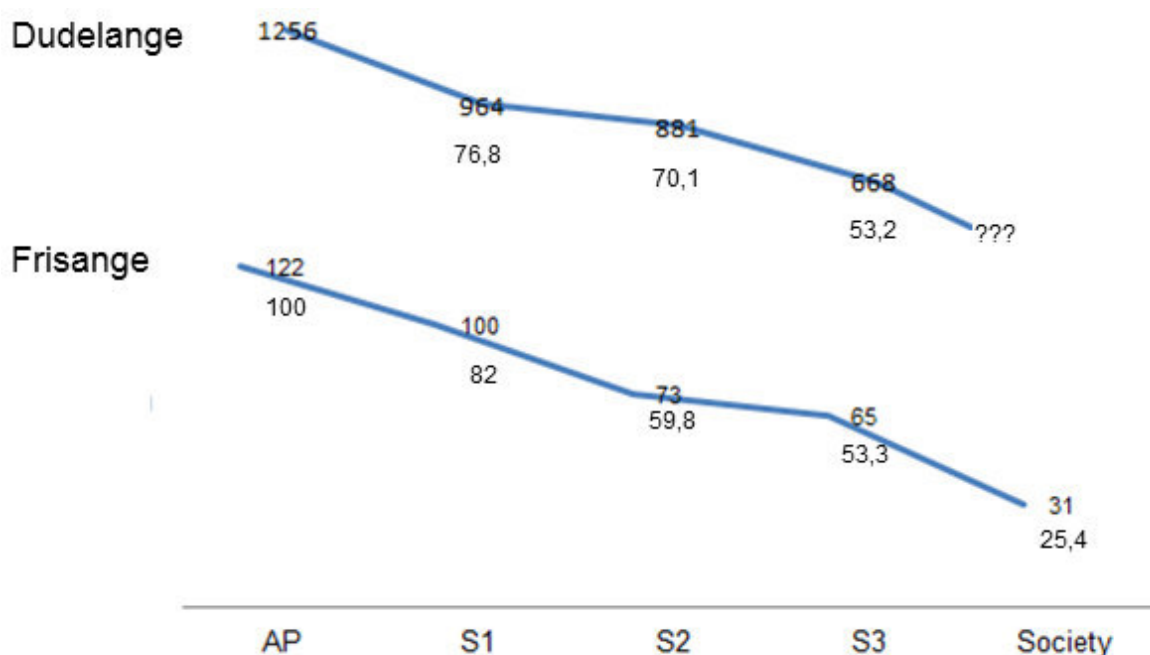


**Figure 1** – Frisange: Increase of residents and music school pupils.<sup>4</sup>

Over the period of twelve years, the number of music pupils has continued to rise, slightly more than the population (Figure 1). This positive evolution is due to the success of an initiative undertaken by the community authorities at that time.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ville de Dudelange (ed.), *Ecole régionale de musique, compte-rendu 2013/14*, p. 3–4, <<http://www.emdudelange.lu/home/index.php/telechargements-18>>, 07.2015.

<sup>4</sup> Sources: <[www.frisange.lu](http://www.frisange.lu)>, Administration communale de Frisange.



AP: "année préparatoire", early music education,  
S1 – S3: *solfège* years 1 – 3.

**Figure 2** – Dudelange and Frisange, decrease of pupils over school years.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, the decrease of pupils in *solfège* over the years has had the consequence that they have had to stop their specialised music education because of the primacy of the compulsory *solfège* over instrumental instruction.

A look at the statistics (Figure 2) of Frisange and Dudelange shows that the evolution of pupil numbers in both institutions is comparable. Almost 50% drop out of *solfège* training within four years. The statistics of Frisange also include the number of pupils joining a community music society (almost exclusively a local wind band).<sup>6</sup>

### 1.3 Szeged/Hungary<sup>7</sup>

The Király-König Péter music school of Szeged has about 900 pupils but no exact statistics exist: those that exist are shown in Table 1.

<sup>5</sup> With many thanks to Mr Adrien Théato, director of the music school in Dudelange and to Mr Albert Nimax, member of the music school commission of Frisange and conductor of the wind band Aspelt (community of Frisange).

<sup>6</sup> Note that the first intention to found a music school in Frisange was to provide budding musicians to the community ensembles.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. <[www.kkpzi.hu/](http://www.kkpzi.hu/)>; many thanks to Mrs Zuzsa Buzás for her collaboration.

	male	female	total	
chordal instruments	62	38	100	Harp, guitar, percussion
keyboard	109	200	309	piano, organ
winds	91	139	230	Recorder, clarinet, oboe, trumpet, horn, trombone, flute
chamber music	1	5	6	-
vocals	4	17	21	vocals
strings	80	76	156	violin, viola, contrabass
theory	27	21	48	solfege, music history, music theory
total	374	496	870	orchestra + choire

Voluntary optional courses

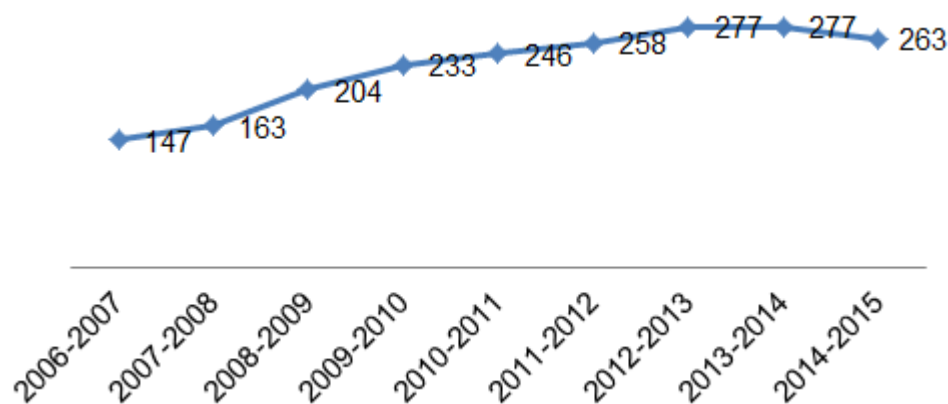
**Table 1** – Szeged: Statistics of the Király-König Péter music school.

As is the case nationwide, after two years of early music education, four years of *solfège* are compulsory in Hungarian music schools. After this period, motivated students can take further *solfège* courses on a voluntary basis or choose between music theory, chamber music or choir.

#### 1.4 Wadgassen/Germany<sup>8</sup>

The music school of Wadgassen was founded in 2006 and is administered by the community of Wadgassen, which has about 19,000 citizens. Regarding the founding year and the number of pupils, it is comparable with Frisange. The evolution in the number of music pupils is represented in Figure 3.

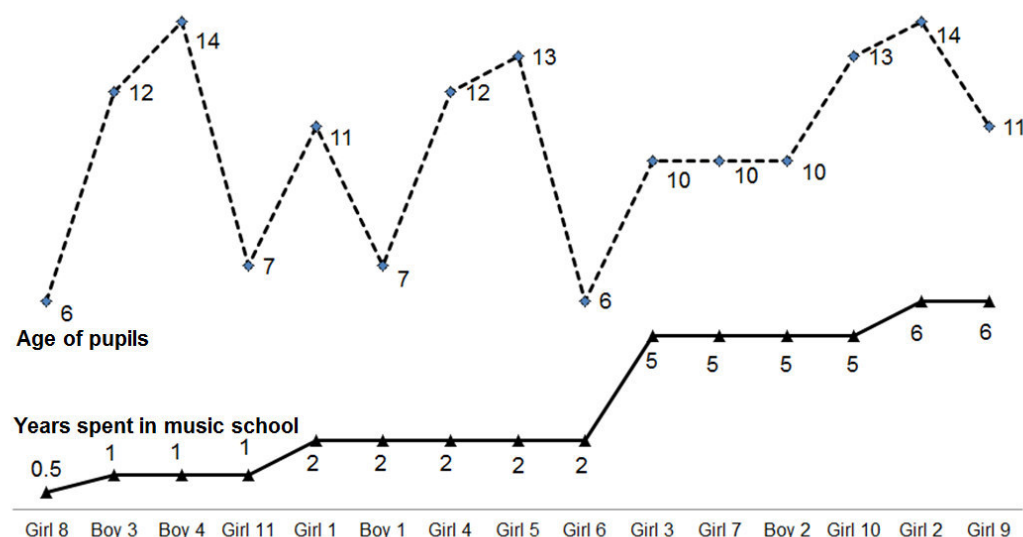
In comparison with Frisange, the increase in pupils is less pronounced and, as a proportion of the population, there are fewer pupils attending the music school in Wadgassen. The reason may be that music courses are usually far more expensive in Germany than in Luxembourg. Considering that *solfège* courses do not exist, drop outs are due to family and financial reasons or problems in school.



**Figure 3** – Wadgassen: Evolution of the music school in Wadgassen.

<sup>8</sup> With many thanks to Ms Kornelia Jakobs for her helpfulness.

Figure 4 shows the drop out rates during the school year 2014/15. It does not include withdrawals between the school years. Although interrupting music courses during a school year could be considered as an irregular departure, stopping music education at the age of 13 or 14, after five or six years, has nothing to do with dropping out because of *solfège*. Therefore, the reason is not due to the method of music education per se.



**Figure 4** – Wadgassen: Pupil's years spent in music school about their age.

## 2.0 Feedback from the Interviews<sup>9</sup>

Interviews were carried out with 10 former music school pupils (three girls and seven boys) and up-and-coming members of the wind bands in Aspelt and Hellange in the community of Frisange.

A range of questions were asked concerning:

1. The reasons for starting music courses;
2. The courses taken (*solfège* and ...);
3. Personal experiences with *solfège* as opposed to instrumental courses;
4. The time investment per week;
5. The reasons for dropping out;
6. If they would have continued *solfège* courses if they were not mandatory, and
7. If they would start *solfège* courses again if they were not mandatory.

The answers were as follows; they meet our expectations and confirm the statistics (Table 2).

<sup>9</sup> With many thanks to Albert Nimax (wind band Aspelt) and to Luc Hansen (wind band Hellange).

- (1) The main reasons for beginning music courses were societal motivations, namely to join local community ensembles and, of course, having a private interest.
- (2) As a consequence, they opted for wind instruments. We attribute this to the fact that the music school of Frisange is located in a rural neighbourhood and that pupils with more interest will attend a conservatoire.
- (3) Compared to its evolution in general schools, *sofège* has survived as a relic of the past: pupils experience it as a top-down course, remark on the absence of interactive opportunities and miss the “fun” factor.
- (4) *Solfège* is too time intensive, at up to three hours a week, while individual instrumental courses are too short: 20 to 60 minutes according to the stages of advancement. On the other hand, instrumental courses have a more positive image.
- (5) Problems with understanding the subject and too much to learn are the main reasons for drop outs, along with the investment of time and a poor pupil-teacher relationship.
- (6) and (7) The statements concerning continuing or resuming musical training without mandatory *sofège* should be considered by those responsible for designing the curricula.

	1 Reason		2 Courses Duration		3 Experience		4 Time to invested per week	5 Reasons to stop			6 / 7 Without Mandatory solfège	
	Band member	Private	Solfège	Instr.	Solfège	Instr.		Too time-consuming	solfège too much useless stuff	Teacher	Would have continued	Resume courses
1 BOY	Yes	Yes	2 hrs	20 min	Bad	Ok!	2- 3 hrs	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
2 BOY	---	---	2 hrs	---	---	---	0,5 hr	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	---
3 BOY	Yes	Yes	2 hrs	30 min	Bad	Ok!	0,5 hr	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	---
4 BOY	Yes	---	2 hrs	30 min	Bad	Ok!	5-6 hrs	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
5 BOY	Yes	Yes	3 hrs	30 min	Bad	Ok!	2 hrs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	---
6 BOY	Yes	Yes	2 hrs	30 min	Bad	Ok!	max 1 hr	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
7 GIRL	No	Yes	2 hrs	30 min	Bad	Ok!	2 - 3 hrs	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
9 BOY	---	Yes	2 hrs	20 min	Bad	Too short	---	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
8 GIRL	Yes	---	2 hrs	60 min	---	---	1 hr	---	---	---	---	---
10 GIRL	---	Yes	2 hrs	30 min	Bad	Too short	max 1 hr	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 2 – Frisange: Summary of interviews.

### 3.0 Final Discussion

Musical skills are not developed through knowledge but are assimilated through experience and constant training: “repetitio est mater studiorum”. Eight year old children should not learn in the abstract, and all written theory should be kept for later, if ever. François Delalande stresses that musical awakening should happen before music education, from the child’s own creativity.<sup>10</sup> The idea of developing musical creativity is treated dismissively, not only in *solfège* instruction, but generally in music education, at least in continental Europe.

One example among many is the hearing and singing of abstract intervals. Intervals could instead be combined with well-known songs adapted to the age of the children. Of course contradictory messages should be carefully avoided.



**Figure 5** – the German children’s song “Hänschen Klein”.

In Figure 5 above, the **minor** thirds in measures 1 and 2 are the incipit of German children’s song “Hänschen Klein”, a song in C **major**. The first two measures are also harmonised with **major** chords. However, pupils learn that G-E and F-E are **minor** intervals. The intellectual message is exact, but the musical context is badly chosen and confuses the pupil. The same applies to the beginning of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony in C **minor**. It opens with a descending **major** third. A better example is in measure 15 of “Hänschen Klein”: the ascending **major** third occurs in a setting of a **major** chord in a **major** song. However, what about the second descending **minor** third in Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony: would this be a suitable example after the beginning descending **major** third? Probably not.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Comeau, Gilles, “Ambiguïtés et lacunes des théories de la pédagogie musicale d’éveil proposée par François Delalande”, in: *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue canadienne de l’éducation* 22/3 (Summer 1997), p. 243. Original text: “Pour Delalande, il paraît préférable ‘d’éveiller’ avant ‘d’enseigner’, de créer ses propres productions sonores avant d’interpréter celles des autres.”



To conclude: either one abstains completely from teaching intervals by theoretical methods, in the knowledge that the added value at a young age is non-existent, or examples are used in strict context.<sup>11</sup>

Musical dictations are greatly feared. Less skilled pupils feel they are quickly pushed to the periphery, and pupils playing transposing instruments (clarinet in B, alto saxophone in Eb, horn in F) are overwhelmed by an exercise where the C that they play is no longer the C that they hear. For these pupils, dictations are elitist and discriminatory compared with violinists and pianists. Musical skills are many and varied and cannot exist to the same extent for all pupils.

Musical signs and symbols can easily be taught along with instrumental courses where learning goes hand in hand with practice. That said, *solfège* teachers (i.e., music teachers in general) and people responsible for programmes should be trained in specialised institutions. It should be compulsory to attend courses in (musical) developmental psychology and (music) pedagogy. For the moment, this is not mandatory in Luxembourg. In Hungary, the situation changed in 2010 and future music teachers are required to take music pedagogy courses, psychology, etc.

One could even go so far as to say that *solfège* should be an optional offer after one or two years of an instrumental course if this is the pupil's choice, for those who have the skills and the ambition to become professional musicians or confirmed amateurs.

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Winandy, Léopold, "The Child and Written Music", in: *Würzburger Hefte zur Musikpädagogik* 6, ed. by Brusniak, Friedhelm; Nitschké, Alain; Sagrillo, Damien, Weikersheim 2014, pp. 38–41.

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